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MIDWAY: A CASE STUDY
THE ROLE OF MAJOR OPERATIONS IN MARITIME CAMPAIGNS

by

Michael R. Matheny

Lieutenant Colonel (P), U.S. Army



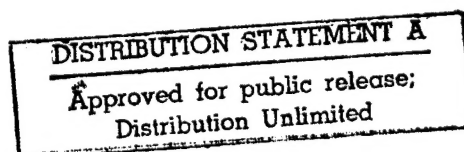
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Michael R. Matheny

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Abstract of

**Midway: A Case Study
The Role of Major Operations in Maritime Campaigns**

Although our joint doctrine suggests that major operations are a key part of our operational art in the design of campaigns, our professional literature does not discuss the role and nature of major operations. The role of major operations may be traced back to the concept of the decisive battle which eventually became integrated into campaign planning and the development of operational art in the 20th century. The Battle of Midway demonstrates that major operations are characterized by large scope, a high level of command and planning, relatively short duration, and most importantly, operational or strategic purpose. Major offensive operations may be used to extend operational reach, attack the enemy center of gravity, or achieve command of the air, sea, or littoral areas. Major defensive operations may be used to force the enemy to reach an early culmination point or meet a strategic threat within a theater of operations. In any case major operations result in decisive changes in the theater of operation. In order to achieve such results the operational commander must sequence, prioritize, and support major operations with theater functional systems such as operational fires, intelligence and reconnaissance. In order to ensure our success in future campaigns, our professional literature needs more focus on the doctrine necessary to plan and fight major operations.

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"The decisive battle is the essential task of warfare, and for this reason warfare should always be based on the decisive battle." Imperial Japanese Navy Battle Instructions, ca. 1934.¹

"The battle is meaningful to war only when it removes obstacles that block the strategic goal." Vice Admiral Wegener, 1929.²

One of the great legacies of the Napoleonic Wars was the apparently overwhelming importance of the decisive battle. On land Napoleon massed his forces and overpowered his enemies in single encounters which frequently achieved immediate political results. This appeared no less true on the oceans as when Nelson achieved the great strategic victory at Trafalgar. Naval theorists such as the influential Alfred T. Mahan popularized this doctrine by insisting on the concentration of the fleet to aggressively seek out the enemy's fleet and bring it to decisive battle.³ Although this doctrine seemed confirmed in the Japanese victory at Tshushima Straits as late as 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War, the world was rapidly changing and the twentieth century brought with it a revolution in military affairs.

By the end of the 19th century the nation states of western Europe had harnessed the power of the industrial revolution to create great armies and navies. As World War I tragically, but convincingly demonstrated, it was beyond the power of the modern army

¹Imperial Japanese Navy Battle Instructions, trans. by David C. Evans from Sareurateu Yuzur, Kaigun daigaku Kyaiku (Tokyo: Kojinsha, 1975), p.8.

²Vice Admiral Wolfgang Wegener, The Naval Strategy of the World War (Berlin:, 1926; reprinted and trans. by Holger Herwig, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p.39.

³Captain Alfred T. Mahan, Naval Strategy, Lectures delivered at the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., between the years 1887 and 1911 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1918), p.199.

or navy to completely destroy the enemy's forces in a single decisive encounter. In addition to the size of military forces, technology geometrically expanded the single battlefield into a theater of operations. Victory could not be achieved in a single battle but a series of battles somehow related to achieving the political purpose which called for the use of arms. It was from this recognition that operational art was born. Shortly after World War I the German Admiral Wegener saw clearly that naval battle is useful only if it serves strategy. Fleet action is not an end in itself, but part of a campaign, a series of battles or actions to achieve strategic purpose. The concept of the single decisive battle, however, lived on, particularly in the doctrine of Japanese navy. In the revolution of military affairs and in the most farsighted military minds, the decisive battle of the 19th century became the "**major operation**" in campaign planning of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In our current joint operational doctrine a campaign consists of "a series of related joint **major operations** ...to accomplish strategic and operational objectives."⁴ It would seem then that at the very heart of our operational art is how the commander sequences and conducts major operations. Unfortunately, although there is a great deal of discussion about centers of gravity, culmination points, and other operational concepts our professional literature is virtually silent on the subject of major operations. The Air Force Manual 1-1 and the Navy's NPD-1 discuss operational art without mentioning the concept of major operations. The Army's FM 100-5 Operations defines major operation but includes the concept only in relation to the campaign plan. In major regional contingencies major operations will surely be sequenced within a campaign plan, but in lesser regional contingencies such as Panama in 1989 or in Grenada in 1983 a single major operation may be sufficient to achieve the strategic objective.⁵

⁴Joint Publication 3-0, Doctrine for Joint Operations, (9 September 1993), p. III-6.

⁵Milan Vego, "Major Operations" (unpublished draft, NWC course material, January,

Major operations are the critical pieces in any campaign plan or national response requiring the employment of significant military forces. In the 19th and early 20th century the admirals and generals deployed, concentrated, and employed their forces in pursuit of the decisive battle. Today, the operational commander deploys, concentrates, and employs his forces for major operations which he hopes will achieve decisive operational or strategic objectives. What characterizes major operations and how do they fit into theater operations? The operational commander maneuvers his forces through major operations. Major operations are necessarily then characterized by large scope, a high level of planning and command, relatively short duration, and most importantly, operational or strategic purpose.

The purpose of major operations is to achieve operationally or strategically decisive objectives in a theater of operations. As noted, this can be done sequentially as part of a campaign or on occasion a single major operation may be sufficient to achieve the desired strategic results. Since major operations seek to achieve operational results, they are normally broad in scope involving large forces. The Army's FM 100-5 Operations states that major operations may be planned and conducted by either the joint force commander or the functional component commanders to support the campaign plan.⁶ If conducted by a functional component commander a major operation may be conducted to obtain control of the service medium. The aerospace commander may conduct a major operation to seize air superiority, likewise the maritime commander may seek sea control or dominance of a littoral area. The key point is, that these major operations must support the operational or strategic plan.

Whether the theater, joint force, or functional component commander plans and conducts the major operation will depend most probably on the size and nature of the

1995), p. 4.

⁶FM 100-5, Operations, (Washington, D.C.: HQ Department of the Army, 1993), p. 4-6.

forces to be employed and how critical the major operation is to achieving theater objectives. Regardless, the major operation should have a single commander. Additionally, the scope and size of the forces involved in a major operation will require extensive logistics support. Again the scope of major operations will mean a duration from days to perhaps weeks. In summary, purpose, scope, level of command and planning, and duration all distinguish major operations from tactical operations and engagements.

One of the prime responsibilities of the operational commander will not only be sequencing major operations, but prioritizing, and exploiting their effects. Since major operations will often employ the bulk of his forces in pursuit of decisive results, these operations must be well supported by the **theater functional systems**. Theater basing, logistical infrastructure, lines of communication and operation, as well as priority, must support the conduct of major operations. The role, purpose, and sequence of major operations must be clearly defined in the operational idea or concept of the campaign in order to make the necessary early decisions on theater infrastructure and deployment. The operational commander must also decide on how major operations will be supported from other theater functional systems such as: **command and control, operational reconnaissance, intelligence, and fires**.

It may happen that major operations will not be sequential but concurrent. In major regional contingencies the aerospace commander conducting a major operation to achieve air superiority may have to compete with the maritime or land component commander for priority in functional theater systems. This may be particularly true in waging major defensive operations. In fact, although the characteristics of major offensive or defensive operations remain the same, their roles in operational warfare may be quite different. Since there is little doctrinal literature on major operations in general and on major defensive or offensive operations in particular, it is best to let history rather than theory guide us. In the case of maritime campaigns there is no better example than the

Battle of Midway in June of 1942. For the Japanese this was a critical offensive major operation, a potential war winner. Concurrently, for the Americans it was a desperate defensive major operation to determine the course of the Pacific War. For both the Americans and Japanese it was a decisive major operation with historic strategic and operational results.

The strategic context for the Battle of Midway begins practically with the war itself. The operational efficiency of the Japanese forces and the military weakness of their opponents combined to provide Japan with stunning victories in the opening months of World War II. The strategic objective of these first phase operations was the seizure of an economic resource area which would assure access to raw materials. The Japanese had long anticipated that these offensive operations would initiate war with the United States and inevitably bring on battle with the U.S. Navy. The strike at Pearl Harbor was a pre-emptive offensive major operation to prevent the U.S. Navy from interfering with first phase operations. Following the great success of these operations the problem now facing Japanese strategic planners was--what next?

The pre-war strategy called for the Japanese navy to defeat the U.S. navy in a **decisive battle** fought in home waters.⁷ Admiral Yamamoto, chief of the Combined Fleet and architect of the strike at Pearl Harbor, preferred a more offensive strategy. The Japanese had three strategic options: advance to Australia, India, or Hawaii. The Combined Fleet planners concluded that the best way to shorten the war was to capture Hawaii. They realized in time the United States' industrial might could create overwhelming advantages in a delayed confrontation in Japanese home waters. By completing the destruction of the American fleet and capturing Hawaii they could deal the U.S. a crushing psychological blow which might convince rather than compel them to

⁷Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, Midway, the Battle That Doomed Japan, (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1955), pp. 12,13,19.

accept Japanese war aims. In January of 1942 after easy early victories this looked entirely possible.⁸

The planning which began in that month called for a campaign which would begin with the capture of "Midway, Johnston, and Palmyra islands after June, send our air strength to those islands, and after these steps are almost completed, mobilize all available strength to invade Hawaii, while attempting to destroy the enemy fleet in a decisive battle."⁹ After further study the Combined Fleet staff concluded that a campaign to Hawaii at this stage of the war was premature because surprise was not possible and the fleet possessed insufficient air strength to overcome enemy land based air and shore batteries in Hawaii.¹⁰

In February the staff considered operations in the Indian ocean. The operational objectives were the destruction of enemy fleets and bases. Strategically it was hoped such operations might encourage anti-British unrest in India, and perhaps establish combined operations with other Axis forces.¹¹ The Indian option, however, did not fare well in war gaming exercises and the Combined Fleet staff returned to a modified Hawaiian plan. The operational idea for this new plan called for the capture of Midway island, its consolidation as a powerful Japanese land air base, and subsequently, a decisive battle with the U.S. fleet under favorable conditions. If the fleet was not strong enough to go all the way to Hawaii, they would take a half step hoping to achieve the

⁸Matome Ugaki, Fading Victory, the Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki 1941-1945, trans. by Maataka Chihaya, ed. by Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1991), p. 75.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p.79.

¹¹Ibid., p. 80.

same results. If successful, an invasion of Hawaii could be made later once control of the sea had been secured.

The operational objectives, **the purpose**, of this major offensive operation to capture Midway were to extend the **operational reach** of the Combined Fleet and achieve a fleet to fleet action which would destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet in a decisive battle. This was not, however, to be just an aimless blow at the Pacific Fleet. Yamamoto clearly believed that the operational center of gravity of U.S. forces in the Pacific lay in its carrier task forces. Once the American carrier task forces were destroyed the Japanese would gain control of the sea and retain, perhaps permanently, the initiative in the Pacific.¹²

The strategic objectives for the Japanese plan remained dealing a strong psychological blow to the American people and extending the defensive perimeter of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. By March the plan was completed and submitted to the Naval General Staff for approval. The concept of operations began with an operational feint to the Aleutians. The Aleutian or Northern Force was to raid U.S. bases in the chain, and then capture Attu and Kiska islands. This operation was sequenced to precede the strike at Midway by one day in the hope of misleading or diverting U.S. attention and, if nothing else, safeguarding the northern flank of the main fleet.

The Midway Operation was **large both in size of forces and the scope of operations** (see Figure 1). The plan committed over 200 ships and 700 planes, virtually the entire available strength of the Combined Fleet. The force included 11 battleships, 8 carriers, 22 cruisers, 21 submarines and additional support ships. This mighty fleet was organized into six task forces: the First Carrier Striking Force (4 carriers plus escort), the Midway invasion force, Main Force (7 battleships plus escort), Northern (Aleutians) Force, Advance Force (submarines), and shore based air force (to be based on Midway after occupation). To strike at Midway the Combined Fleet had to reach across the entire

¹²Fuchida, Midway, p. 61.

Pacific theater. The Main Force and Carrier Striking Force sortied from home waters to Midway some 2500 miles distant. The Northern Force also sortied from home waters but traveled an additional 1650 miles to the Aleutian area of operations.¹³

Yamamoto attached such importance to this major operation he determined to command in person, afloat, accompanying the Main Force. **Command and control** arrangements, however, were crippled by his insistence on radio listening silence to preserve surprise. His widely separated forces were greatly hampered in maneuvering under these conditions as well as in responding to Yamamoto's direction. **Operational and tactical security** for this major operation were badly planned and executed---with disastrous results.

Once the Combined Fleet was deployed, Japanese planners anticipated that Operation Midway would take approximately 2 weeks. The two small carriers accompanying the Northern Force would commence the operation with a carrier strike against Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians on 3 June. These **operational fires** delivered 250 miles from the American base was to be the opening gambit to focus U.S. attention. Landings at Kiska, Adak, and Attu islands were to follow to reinforce this potential strategic threat to American territory. On 4 June the plan called for the First Carrier Strike Force to also deliver operational fires with a carrier strike against Midway. The invasion of Midway was scheduled for dawn on 6 June. All Japanese forces would then assume positions of readiness for 7 days to engage main elements of the U.S. fleet if it sortied from Hawaii.¹⁴

The Japanese also planned to use their submarines to provide additional operational fires to attrit U.S. forces and perform critical **operational reconnaissance**. Two

¹³Richard W. Bates, The Battle for Midway Including the Aleutian Phase, June 3 to June 14, 1942, Strategic and Tactical Analysis (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College, 1948), pp.5,6.

¹⁴Fuchida, Midway, pp. 84,85.

submarine squadrons were to be deployed in two cordons covering the approaches to Midway from Hawaii by 2 June. Anxious to confirm the presence of the American carriers at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese planners devised Operation K to reconnoiter the Hawaiian naval base. Since the Japanese flying boats did not have sufficient range to reach all the way to Hawaii, Operation K called for 3 submarines to rendezvous and refuel two type-2 flying boats at French Frigate shoals 500 miles northwest of Hawaii. This reconnaissance was scheduled for 31 May.¹⁵

The Combined Fleet submitted the plan, designated Operation MI, to the Naval General Staff for approval, but it was a hard sell. The Naval General Staff preferred pushing south against Australia. Only Yamamoto's threat to resign secured the plan's approval. Both staffs continued to argue the timing of the operation--until the Doolittle Raid. The tactical carrier borne air raid against Japan in April deeply embarrassed senior leaders and ended debate on Operation MI.¹⁶ Clearly, a tactical action can have operational results. Anxious now to prevent further strikes against Japan the Combined Fleet sortied on 27 May enroute to perhaps the most important major operation of the Pacific war.

Fortunately for the Americans the fog of war cleared considerably in February of 1942 as the Pacific Fleet cryptographers succeeded in cracking the Japanese navy's operational code. Although the code was scheduled to be changed in April, the Japanese decided to avoid the inevitable distribution problem just prior to a major operation by postponing the change. It was a fatal error in **operational security**. Combined with

¹⁵Japanese Monograph No. 110, Submarine Operations in Second Phase Operations, Part I April-August 1942 (prepared by HQ, Army Forces Far East, 1952), pp.21, 22.

¹⁶Fuchida, Midway, p. 71.

astute analysis based on radio traffic and intuition, fleet intelligence provided Admiral Nimitz, the Pacific Fleet commander, with a detailed warning of the Japanese plan.¹⁷

As a theater commander, Admiral Nimitz was responsible for the Pacific Ocean Area. This vast theater included North, Central, and South Pacific theaters of operation. The Japanese Operation MI threatened not only Midway in the Central Pacific but American territory in the Aleutian chain located in the North Pacific. The Joint Chiefs directed Nimitz to "contain Japanese forces within the Pacific theater, support the defense of the continent of North America" and guard the SLOCs.¹⁸ To conduct this major defensive operation Nimitz organized a Northern Pacific Force, a Striking Force, and a supporting Submarine Force. The Commander Pacific Fleet retained command of all three forces but unlike Yamamoto, Nimitz was content with centralized planning and overall supervision, and insisted on decentralized execution. He remained in Hawaii.

Faced with a potential strategic threat in the North Pacific and a major operational threat in the Central Pacific, Nimitz moved quickly. Forewarned that the Aleutians were a target, although an operational feint, Nimitz formed a Northern Pacific Force, Task Force 8, consisting of 2 heavy cruiser, 3 light cruisers, and 10 destroyers. TF 8 was ordered to oppose the Japanese advance in coordination with land based Army air forces. Curiously, the Joint Chiefs directed the commander of Army forces in the Aleutians to take command of all army and navy air assets and to report as a task group under TF 8. The Rear Admiral Theobald, commander TF 8 chose to work in coordination with rather than command the Army Air Forces. Further he elected to retain control of his own naval

¹⁷Edwin T. Layton, Roger Pineau, John Costello, "And I Was There, Pearl Harbor and Midway--Breaking the Secrets" (NY: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1985), p. 339.

¹⁸Bates, The Battle for Midway, p.38.

reconnaissance aircraft and this early crack in the unity of command did not facilitate defensive operations.¹⁹

Nimitz personally visited Midway on 2 May and hurriedly reinforced the island to a strength of 121 combat aircraft and a garrison of 3000 men by 4 June. Also by 4 June the Pacific Fleet had 20 submarines patrolling in three arcs: 100, 150, and 200 miles from Midway. The tactical center of gravity of this major defensive operation was the carrier task forces which Nimitz was able to assemble, patch up, and deploy to the area of operations. The carrier striking force with three carriers deployed northeast of Midway to await the arrival of virtually the entire Japanese fleet.

With such inferior forces Nimitz could not afford a "decisive battle" of annihilation. He directed the tactical commander to "inflict maximum damage on enemy by employing strong attrition tactics."²⁰ Nimitz made it clear that the commander of the Strike Force was not to unduly risk the precious carriers. As the first week of June, 1942 came to the Pacific theater, the plans were implemented, the stage was set.

This Japanese major offensive operation was not well supported by the theater functional systems in operational security, intelligence, and reconnaissance. The failure to ensure the security of their operational code destroyed any chance of surprise and allowed the U.S. fleet to develop a timely and coherent defensive plan. Japanese operational intelligence reinforced by the Naval General Staff intelligence consistently believed the U.S. still had a carrier task force operating in the Southwest Pacific.²¹ This would have significantly increased the odds in Yamamoto's favor as well as indicate that the Americans were unaware of the impending operation. Operation K failed in its

¹⁹Ibid., p.40.

²⁰Samuel E. Morison, Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions May 42-August 42, History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II, Volume IV (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1949), p. 84.

²¹Fuchida, Midway, pp. 232, 233.

attempt to provide Yamamoto with operational reconnaissance of Pearl Harbor. Alerted to an earlier successful Japanese effort to refuel reconnaissance aircraft at French Frigate shoals, Nimitz directed an American seaplane tender be stationed there. The submarines were unable to establish the rendezvous.

Friction also hampered Japanese efforts as maintenance delays kept their submarines from establishing their reconnaissance cordons off Hawaii until 4 June. The U.S. carrier task forces sortied from Pearl Harbor on 28 and 30 May. Without knowing where the most powerful elements of the U.S. fleet were located, Yamamoto continued to sail toward Midway confident in his superior numbers and training.

On 3 June The Northern Japanese force launched its attack on Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians. The following day on schedule the Japanese First Carrier Striking Force launched a damaging air strike against Midway. Unfortunately for the Japanese the commander of the First Carrier Striking Force was no better served by his tactical reconnaissance than by Yamamoto's operational reconnaissance. The American Strike Force found the enemy carriers first and delivered devastating blows on 4 June. Within 24 hours the Japanese lost 4 large carriers. With his tactical center of gravity destroyed, his operational center of gravity (4 of 11 combat carriers in the entire fleet) severely damaged, Yamamoto withdrew the fleet to home waters. Losing only one carrier and one destroyer, the U.S. Strike Force left the area of operations enroute to Pearl Harbor on 6 June. The battle for Midway lasted a furious 48 hours.

The Japanese Northern Force was more successful and captured Kiska and Attu islands. The lack of the unity of the American command hampered the defense in this theater of operations. In fact, the combat in the Aleutian chain might be considered from the U.S. perspective as a separate major defensive operation which later became part of a historical rather than completely planned campaign to eliminate a distinct strategic threat in this theater of operation. Bad weather and strategic priorities postponed the campaign to retake the two islands until the following Spring. This campaign was officially

designated as the Northern Pacific Campaign and did not conclude until August of 1943.²² What began as an operational feint for the Japanese, became for the Americans a major defensive operation in the Aleutians which led to a separate if secondary campaign in a isolated theater of operations

The reasons for the Japanese defeat at Midway have been variously ascribed to intelligence failure, poor execution, and plain old American good luck. A close study of the tactical action clearly reinforces Clausewitz' emphasis on chance. Good luck, however, has also been described as when preparation meets opportunity. The Americans although greatly outnumbered and inferior in combat experience and training were, nonetheless, better prepared to meet opportunity. For the Japanese, the ghost of the Battle of Tshushima Straits hung heavily over their staff planners. The Japanese pursued the decisive battle in lieu of an adequate strategy. Operation MI was not tied to a well developed campaign or national strategy to achieve Japanese war aims. Yamamoto realized something had to be done before U.S. strength became overwhelming, and so he pursued a Mahanian strategy which was little more than a service strategy. Even if the Combined Fleet had captured Midway and inflicted a defeat on the Pacific Fleet, operational success cannot often rescue bad strategy.

There are many lessons to be learned from these major operations. Yamamoto as the operational commander failed to make sure **theater functional systems such as security, reconnaissance, and intelligence** adequately supported the operation. As for Nimitz, the Pacific Fleet Commander, prioritized his major defensive operations providing clear guidance but relied on decentralized execution. For the Japanese, "thereafter it became necessary to consider the naval operations as mainly defensive on account of the loss of

²²U.S. Navy at War 1941-1945, Official Reports to the Secretary of the Navy, Admiral Ernest J. King (Washington: United States Navy Department, 1946), p. 74.

4 carriers".²³ In essence, Nimitz used a major defensive operation to force the Japanese to reach an early culmination point in the Pacific Theater.

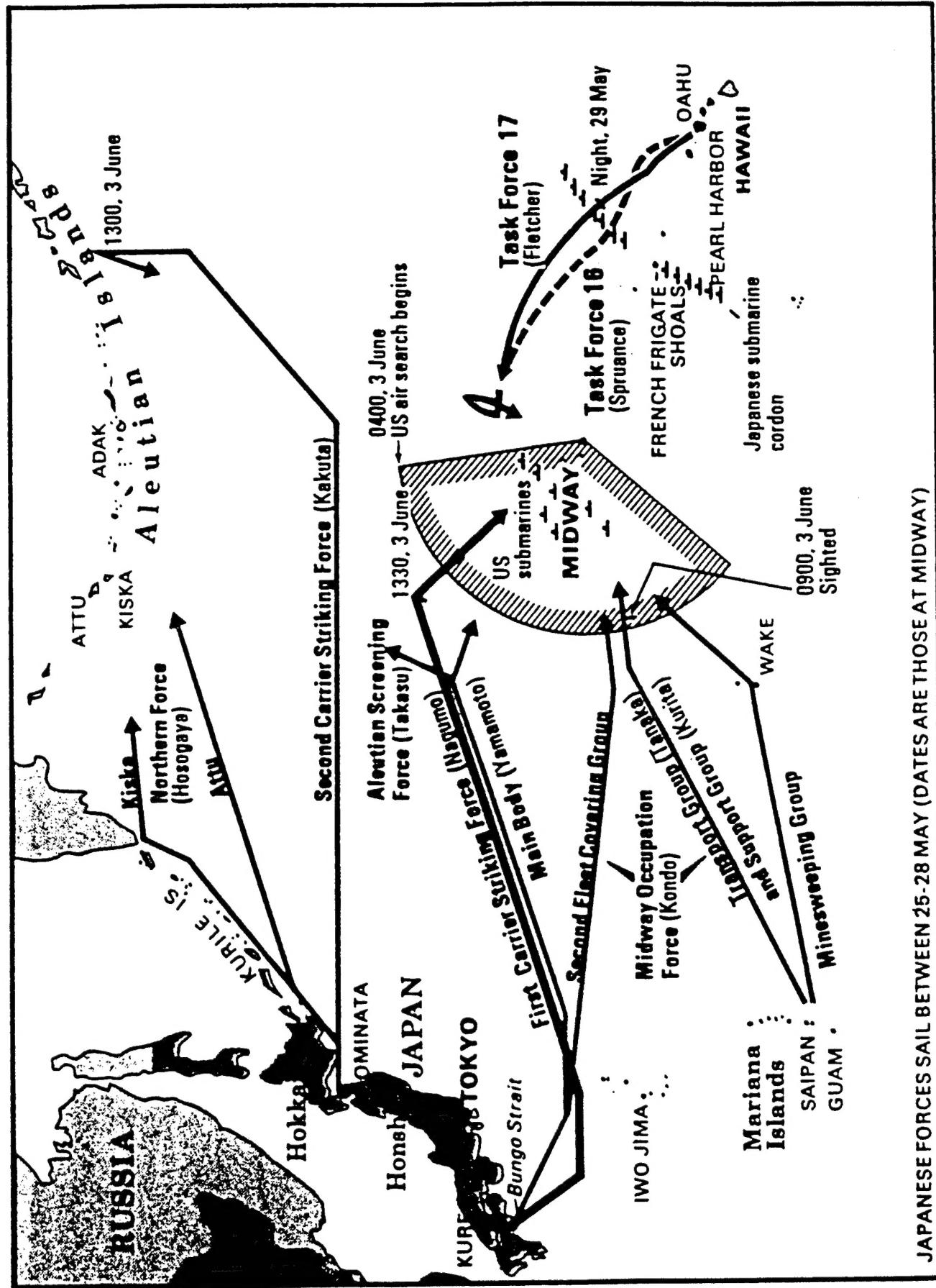
In summary, major operations are the critical pieces in campaign planning. They are planned and commanded at a high level, normally at the joint level. They are broad in scope involving large perhaps even the bulk of forces in the theater. The duration of major operations varies but can range from days to weeks. In certain circumstances such as lesser regional contingencies, a major operation may achieve strategic objectives. In major regional contingencies, certainly in unlimited wars, major operations are sequenced to achieve operational objectives within a campaign plan.

This case study demonstrates that in a maritime theater operational objectives for offensive major operations may include extending operational reach, attacks on the enemy center of gravity, or achieving command of the air, sea, and littoral areas. Defensive major operations may be used to force the enemy to reach an early culmination point or meet a strategic threat within a theater of operations. In any case major operations result in decisive changes in the theater of operation. In order to achieve such results the operational commander must sequence, prioritize, and support major operations with theater functional systems such as operational fires, intelligence, and reconnaissance.

The decisive battle of the 19th century has found a different expression in the development of operational art in the 20th and 21st centuries. Military forces now mass and move to combat in major operations directly linked to operational and strategic objectives within a plan of campaign. In order to ensure success our professional literature needs more focus on the doctrine necessary to plan and fight major operations in a joint environment.

²³VADM Ozawa quoted in U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Vol. I (Naval Analysis Division, 1946), p.11.

THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY: 3-5 June 1942



JAPANESE FORCES SAIL BETWEEN 25-28 MAY (DATES ARE THOSE AT MIDWAY)

FIGURE 1

Admiral Yamamoto's Operational Plan

FROM LAYTON, "AND I WAS THERE."

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